



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Qfwfq as Kafka? Possible-worlds interpretations

**Citation for published version:**

Messina, D 2011, 'Qfwfq as Kafka? Possible-worlds interpretations', *Modern Language Review*, vol. 106, no. 4, pp. 1001-1027. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/info/10.5699/modelangrevi.106.4.1001>>

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Modern Language Review

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Messina, D. (2011). Qfwfq as Kafka? Possible-Worlds Interpretations. *Modern Language Review*, 106(4), 1001-1027.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Qfwfq as Kafka? Possible-Worlds Interpretations

Author(s): Davide Messina

Source: *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4 (October 2011), pp. 1001-1027

Published by: [Modern Humanities Research Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modelangrevi.106.4.1001>

Accessed: 29/04/2013 12:06

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Modern Humanities Research Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Modern Language Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## QFWFQ AS KAFKA? POSSIBLE-WORLDS INTERPRETATIONS

If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have enumerated resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This second fact is more significant. [...] The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors.

(JORGE L. BORGES)<sup>1</sup>

### *Model Reading: Kripke with Kafka*

In 1965 Italo Calvino published a collection of twelve stories which marked the invention of a new genre: *Le cosmicomiche*.<sup>2</sup> Before submitting the manuscript to the publisher, he was still particularly concerned with one of the earliest stories, 'Un segno nello spazio', and decided to read *La crisi semantica delle arti* (1963),<sup>3</sup> by the philosopher Emilio Garroni.

Calvino had received a copy of Garroni's book when it was published, but read it only in 1965 because, as he wrote in a letter to the philosopher, in 1963 he began writing the cosmicomic stories and was determined to avoid any concern with semantics. While putting the final touches to the manuscript, however, he realized that 'Un segno' represented a recursive model of the cosmicomic universe and played a pivotal role within the collection. He looked into *La crisi semantica* and found some helpful ideas to give unity to his narrative project:

La lettura del Suo libro mi è venuta al momento giusto, dato che le cose che scrivo adesso sono dei racconti in cui più che mai sono alle prese con 'segnicità' (quello che per me è uno sviluppo d'una immagine di partenza secondo una logica interna all'immagine o al sistema d'immagini) e 'semanticità' (quello che per me è la raggiera di possibili significati d'ogni segno-immagine-parola, per lo più allegorizzazioni storico-intellettuali, che si presentano sempre un momento dopo e di cui non devo mai preoccuparmi troppo se voglio trovare l'organizzazione perfetta in cui la logica

I would like to thank Remo Ceserani and the anonymous reader for the *Modern Language Review* for their most valuable suggestions for improving this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Jorge L. Borges, 'Kafka and his Precursors', in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates, trans. by James E. Irby (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the different collections of cosmicomic stories see Italo Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. by Claudio Milanini and others, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1991–92), II, 1318–58, 1455–75 (henceforth abbreviated as RR; after the first full note, further references to Calvino's texts are given in parentheses in the text). See also Martin McLaughlin, 'Introduction', in Italo Calvino, *The Complete Cosmicomics*, trans. by Martin McLaughlin and others (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. vii–xxiv.

<sup>3</sup> Emilio Garroni, *La crisi semantica delle arti* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1963).

segnica — che è una e una sola — e la logica semantica — che deve avere libero gioco su vari piani — diventano una sola cosa).<sup>4</sup>

So far, most readings of Calvino's new genre and late works have consistently focused on the semiotic logic of their composition: 'As anyone familiar with the fictions of Calvino knows, *Cosmicomics* is inspired by the latest theories of semiotics', as Margarethe Hagen writes.<sup>5</sup> Semantics, nevertheless, is not only essential for interpretation but, as becomes clear in the letter to Garroni, also for the narrative unity of the cosmicomic collection. In the following discussion I shall argue that the integration of the two logical models is achieved and can systematically be analysed through the definition of its main sign, the 'unpronounceable' Qfwfq, according to possible-worlds semantics.

Possible-worlds semantics, or model theory of modal logic as we know it today, was developed at the beginning of the 1960s with fundamental contributions by Saul Kripke, whose influential paper 'Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic' was published in 1963. A technical analysis of Kripke's model clearly exceeds the purpose and competence of this paper, but possible-worlds semantics can be used to develop and support a new interpretation of Calvino's cosmicomic project.

Kripke's modal semantics produced a general redefinition of formal logic and, in the 1970s, was tentatively used for a new theory of fiction. In a 1975 paper Thomas Pavel outlined its principles as follows:

A model structure in Kripke's sense is an ordered triple  $(G, K, R)$ , where  $K$  is a non-null set,  $G$  is a member of  $K$  and  $R$  is a reflexive relation on  $K$ . In search of a more intuitive representation of model structures, logicians use Leibniz's notion of possible world.  $K$  may be viewed as a set of possible worlds,  $G$  as a privileged member of this set, namely the 'real' world, and  $R$  as a relation which links the actual world  $G$  with other worlds belonging to  $K$  and which are possible alternatives to  $G$ .<sup>6</sup>

The letter  $K$ , which designates a set of possible worlds, acknowledges Kripke's seminal work in modal semantics, that is to say in the branch of logic which deals with the interpretation of possible, necessary, or contingent states of affairs. The name of a set is, of course, a logical symbol and not a proper name

<sup>4</sup> Italo Calvino, *Lettere 1940-1985*, ed. by Luca Baranelli (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), pp. 891-92 (henceforth abbreviated as *L*).

<sup>5</sup> Margarethe Hagen, 'The Visual in *Cosmicomics*: Myth and Classical Rhetoric', in *Image, Eye and Art in Calvino: Writing Visibility*, ed. by Birgitte Grundtvig and others (London: Legenda, 2007), pp. 48-59 (p. 53). Cf. Aldo Rossi, 'La semiologia', in *Italo Calvino: atti del convegno internazionale (Firenze, Palazzo Medici-Riccardi 26-28 febbraio 1987)*, ed. by Giovanni Falschi (Milan: Garzanti, 1988), pp. 239-59; Guido Bonsaver, 'Il Calvino semiotico: dal romanzo naturalistico all'opera come macrotesto', *Italianist*, 14 (1994), 160-94.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Pavel, 'Possible Worlds' in Literary Semantics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2 (1975), 165-76 (p. 165); cf. Saul Kripke, 'Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic', in *Reference and Modality*, ed. by Leonard Linsky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 63-72 (p. 64) (first published in *Acta philosophica Fennica*, 16 (1963), 83-94).

like 'Kripke'. The problem is that the same philosopher would question this very intuitive distinction, while his solution to the problem provides a logical argument to support our intuitive use of language as regards fictional worlds.

To understand how this is possible, let us consider the letter K as a fictional name, as opposed to a symbol in a logical calculus. We could assume, for instance, the strong interpretation given by George Steiner in *After Babel* (1975):

To a literate member of Western culture in the mid-twentieth century, the capital letter K is nearly an ideogram, invoking the presence of Kafka or of his eponymous doubles. 'I find the letter K offensive, almost nauseating,' noted Kafka mordantly in his diary, 'and yet I write it down, it must be characteristic of me.' Such vividness and personal focus of associative content can colour even the most abstract, formally neutral of expressive terms. Contrary to what logicians have asserted, numerals do not necessarily satisfy the condition of an identity and universality of associative content.<sup>7</sup>

There is no reason which prevents logicians from being members of this literate group, but none of them would ever assume Kripke or Kafka as a semantic interpretation of K, let alone as its 'associative content'. We could say that readers of fiction and logicians belong to two different reading groups, both being members of the real world but with a different relation to the possible readings of K.

The main difference between logical and fictional possible worlds, as explained by Umberto Eco in his paper 'Small Worlds' (1986), is that the first ones are 'empty' elements of a language calculus, while the second ones are comfortably 'furnished' with cultural units—that is, they are constructs or subsets of the same language that is used to describe them.<sup>8</sup> The objection could be raised, then, that possible-worlds semantics and fiction theory are two different models for two very different sets of problems. On the whole, the logical model can be transferred into the literary-theoretic domain only by way of metaphorical implementation. As a matter of fact, however, Eco further argues that they do have something fundamental in common: 'From its very beginning, the notion of possible world as dealt with by Model Theory is a metaphor coming from literature [. . .]. A possible world is what a complete novel describes.'<sup>9</sup>

Strictly speaking, unlike novels, possible worlds of logic cannot represent incomplete states of affairs and be semantically contradictory.<sup>10</sup> And yet, fic-

<sup>7</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975), 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 179.

<sup>8</sup> Umberto Eco, 'Small Worlds', in id., *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 64–82 (p. 65) (paper first presented at the 65th Nobel Symposium, Lidings, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bohumil Fořt, 'Are Fictional Worlds Really Possible? A Short Contribution to their Semantics', *Style*, 40 (2006), 189–97 (p. 189).

tion theory effectively works with metaphors. The metaphor of a novel as a complete description of a possible world states, at the same time, its logical incompleteness and the 'cosmological' task of its model reader, who actualizes some of the infinite possibilities of this world.

If we define a model as a set-theoretic structure for the interpretation of a language, then we can say that 'the Model Reader is a textually established set of felicity conditions (Austin, 1962) to be met in order to have a macrospeech act (such as a text is) fully actualized'.<sup>11</sup> When scientific descriptions of the actual world are used as possible worlds of literature, metaphors constitute a model of semantic interpretation. For example, Euclidean geometry describes the actual world, even if in abstract terms, and 'can become the portrait of a possible world only if we take it as the portrait of Abbot's *Flatland*'.<sup>12</sup>

I think that this is what happens in Calvino's *Cosmicomiche*, where scientific theories are taken as starting-points for the stories told by a model reader of this world, called Qfwfq. Accordingly, I shall read Calvino through Kripke, and then focus on Kafka's relevance for a broader interpretation of Qfwfq's possible worlds. It is an 'interpretative bet', as Eco would say, and involves some degree of over-interpretation, but 'the contexts allow us to make this bet less uncertain than a bet on the red or the black of a roulette wheel'.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Qfwfq: Name and Necessity*

Introducing the third collection of cosmicomic stories, entitled *La memoria del mondo* (1968), Calvino described the main character as follows:

Protagonista delle 'Cosmicomiche' è sempre un personaggio, Qfwfq, difficile da definire, perché di lui non si sa nulla. Non è nemmeno detto che sia un uomo: probabilmente possiamo considerarlo tale dal momento in cui il genere umano comincia ad esistere; [. . .] non è nemmeno un personaggio, Qfwfq, è una voce, un punto di vista, un occhio (o un ammicco) umano proiettato sulla realtà d'un mondo che pare sempre più refrattario alla parola e all'immagine. (*RR*, II, 1301-02; cf. *ibid.*, p. 1477)

The description bears manifold contradictions, in particular the two statements that the protagonist is always the same character but is not properly a character. In fact, Qfwfq is the model reader of the cosmicomic universe, not simply one of its members. This partially explains another salient contradiction: on the one hand, we are told that the protagonist is 'probably' human as far as there is human life in the world; on the other hand, there is a protagonist

<sup>11</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 11. Eco's reference is to John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. by James O. Urmson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

<sup>12</sup> Eco, 'Small Worlds', p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Umberto Eco and others, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 63.

only as far as there is a story—that is, a narrative voice or a human point of view projected onto a world which appears more and more ‘refractory’ to any fictional—verbal or visual—treatment.

In the second edition of *La memoria del mondo*, published in 1975, Calvino added a ‘Postilla’, in which he further clarified that Qfwfq is simply the character which says ‘I’, each time allowing the passage from the opening quotation of a scientific theory to the story itself. But he also gave new elements for the interpretation of the narrative voice:

Questa voce appartiene a un personaggio che risponde al nome impronunciabile di Qfwfq (i nomi dei personaggi delle *Cosmicomiche* sono tutti più o meno impronunciabili, sembrano più formule che nomi), un personaggio che si esprime e si comporta come chiunque di noi, ma che è difficile definire un essere umano dato che ‘era già lì’ quando il genere umano non esisteva, e anche prima che ci fosse la terra e la vita sulla terra; comunque, pare che egli abbia assunto successivamente varie forme, anche animali (mollusco, o dinosauro) e in seguito umane, e si ritrova oggi a essere un vecchietto che ne ha viste tante, e che per di più ha l’abitudine di sballarle grosse. Le teorie sull’origine della Luna, per esempio, sono varie e in contraddizione tra loro; a ciascuna di esse Qfwfq dà ragione e porta la sua testimonianza a favore. (RR, II, 1306–07)

One of the main tasks of Qfwfq is thus supporting each one of the theories about the universe, however contradictory they may appear, with a different story. Contradictions about its probable human status are well suited to the possible fictional worlds. Some of the contradictions can also appear as natural as the fact that light particles travel through space as probability waves without collapsing onto one single reality, a fact that supports (with the necessary mathematical calculations) Hugh Everett’s ‘many-worlds interpretation’ of our actual world. To be sure, the process of storytelling appears like measuring an atom according to quantum theory: as a result, it creates a universe of infinite parallel worlds.

But what about the alleged impossibility of pronouncing Qfwfq’s name? The adoption of a character with an ‘unpronounceable’ name, in principle, does not mean that we cannot imagine vocalized instances as (more or less strong) interpretations of the cosmicomic project. This name is not like the Hebrew Tetragrammaton with an additional letter for the sake of symmetry. It is ‘more or less unpronounceable’, in the first place, for specific narrative reasons: like the protagonist of Samuel Beckett’s *Unnamable* (1953), its main function is ‘say I. Unbelieving’<sup>14</sup>—that is to say, interpreting the self-reference of the first-person pronoun as an utterly fictional function.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove, 1958; repr. London: Calder & Boyars, 1975), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Kristi Siegel, ‘Italo Calvino’s *Cosmicomics*: Qfwfq’s Postmodern Autobiography’, *Italica*, 68 (1991), 43–59 (pp. 45–46).



In an interview for the 1966 Strega Prize, Calvino spelt the name as 'qu-effe-vudoppio-effe-qu', and suggested that all cosmicomic characters should not be read but rather seen, like some foreign names: 'Spesso io credo che i personaggi dei romanzi, soprattutto dei romanzi stranieri, li vediamo più di quanto non li leggiamo, così, fonicamente, e quindi sono specie di formule che sono molto riconoscibili.'<sup>16</sup> As it is for Steiner's K, this group of letters is 'nearly an ideogram', a strange name in a foreign language, which defamiliarizes the reader from the ordinary name-functioning and focuses the attention on the story. This raises the question of what makes the difference between a name, which ultimately secures the possibility to 'say I' in all possible worlds, and any other word or (more or less random) string of letters. Is Qfwfq a name at all? If so, it is in the first place the name of a K-set of possible worlds, each one described by one of the cosmicomic stories.

'Non sappiamo se Italo Calvino abbia mai posto l'occhio al telescopio per scrutare stelle e pianeti', as the writer ironically noted in the 'Postilla' (RR, II, 1304). In fact, it is not necessary to know whether he did it or not, as Kripke suggested in his 1970 lectures on 'Naming and Necessity':

A possible world isn't a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope. Generally speaking, another possible world is too far away. Even if we travel faster than light, we won't get to it. A possible world is *given by the descriptive conditions we associate with it*. [. . .] 'Possible worlds' are *stipulated*, not *discovered* by powerful telescopes.<sup>17</sup>

The same holds true for proper names, which are stipulated by an initial act of linguistic 'baptism'. Kripke therefore points out that there is no logical reason to invalidate the intuitive supposition that a name is a constant of an individual in all possible worlds. To express this ordinary-language evidence with a more technical definition, the philosopher says that a name is a 'rigid designator', i.e. a logical sign which refers to 'the same thing' in all possible worlds.<sup>18</sup>

Elaborating on the semantic treatment of modalities outlined by Rudolf Carnap in *Meaning and Necessity*,<sup>19</sup> Kripke clarifies that the meaning of a name is not a description of immutable properties, which may change in different possible worlds, but the individual the subject term refers to. Such an individual is the same in all possible worlds for the simple reason (in simple terms, at least) that these worlds are different descriptions of 'the same thing'.

<sup>16</sup> Calvino [VHS], ed. by Daniela Brogi, 2 vols (Palermo: Palumbo, 2000), II (my transcription).

<sup>17</sup> Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Rudolf Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947; 2nd edn 1956; repr. 1988).



'Fictional worlds', after all, 'are the only ones in which sometimes a theory of rigid designation holds completely.'<sup>20</sup>

For the purpose of my analysis, the main consequence of Kripke's theory of rigid designation is that the existence of a name is a sufficient condition for a 'trans-world identification', and this is the very first function of Qfwfq. It designates the same individual in different worlds, because its different properties do not affect the subject term; on the contrary, the criteria for the identification follow the stipulated identity of the subject term in all possible worlds. Qfwfq is 'segno e regno e nome' of the *Cosmicomiche* (RR, II, 112). Each cosmicomic story is a different possible world, but in each one Qfwfq is the same individual and we recognize it in all stories. Perhaps Calvino solicits the reader's involvement exactly in this basic question: what is identity if not the individual way to tell one's story?

As the author of the first sign of the cosmicomic universe, we do identify Qfwfq as the name of the voice which says I: 'Era come un nome, il nome di quel punto e anche il mio nome che io avevo segnato su quel punto' (RR, II, 110). We do recognize its distinctive voice even when it is reduced to 'io Q<sub>o</sub>' (RR, II, 316), as in the eponymous last story of *Ti con zero* (1967)—the second cosmicomic collection, eventually included as the last cycle of *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove* (1984).<sup>21</sup> In this case, Qfwfq is almost the name of the universe at I<sub>o</sub>, where narrative time is reduced to the simplest possibility of identification with the subject that says I (Q<sub>o</sub>). Otherwise, it would become an 'accidental' designator of the fictional universe of reference: 'one meter long at t<sub>o</sub>', argues Kripke, is not the same as 'one meter' in all possible worlds.<sup>22</sup>

The first-person pronoun is a very common instance of a name as a rigid designator. This is the constant 'name' that we use throughout our lives despite all the changes we undergo or the aliases we may assume. It gives unity and continuity to the collection of stories which make an individual life, from linguistic baptism to metaphysical storytelling. And this is why Kristi Siegel could interpret Calvino's *Cosmicomiche* as 'Qfwfq's Postmodern Autobiography', where the postmodern element is given by 'projecting possible worlds'<sup>23</sup> beyond the classic one-world frame of reference.

With a further distinction, we shall say that the first-person pronoun maps the 'intensional' field of a proper name to all possible worlds in which referring to the same individual as a Self makes sense in the same way—that is to say, it posits a logical equivalence beyond the actual naming, as opposed to the 'extensional' field of individuals that have the same name, which can

<sup>20</sup> Eco, 'Small Worlds', p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> See above, n. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 54–56.

<sup>23</sup> Siegel, p. 43.

be empirically determined.<sup>24</sup> There has been a discussion on whether or not the intensional framework still functions in Kripke's model. Lubomír Doležel argues that the 'radically non-essentialist semantics' of proper names as rigid designators does imply the necessity of an intensional name-functioning in fiction, which does not require the descriptive completeness of logical sets:

Let us assume that the fictional world is given by the set of its individuals, distinguished from each other by purely extensional signs, such as lower-case letters of the alphabet. In other words, the fictional individuals of the set  $D = a, b, c, d, \dots$  are individuated, but not yet named in natural language terms. In the act of naming, each fictional individual will be assigned either a proper name, or a definite description. If this assignment is carried out consistently and exclusively in the text, we will say that a *two-value intensional functioning of naming* operates in the text.<sup>25</sup>

Such a functioning can be plainly observed in the *Cosmicomiche*, where sets of letters are selected as proper names, such as Qfwfq, while some other characters are designated by definite descriptions only, such as 'mio cugino il sordo' in the first story, 'La distanza della luna'. But this is only a minimal regularity in the many-value system of naming that a fictional writer can adopt, including some relevant exceptions to the rule.

One of the main regularities in the intensional name-functioning of Qfwfq's stories is symmetry. In the monograph *I, Writer, I, Reader* (1997) Stephen Chubb pointed out that 'the apparently random typographical formation of his name reflects the arbitrariness of naming signs, and its palindromic form suggests the binary polarity that is a common feature of Calvino's writing'.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Qfwfq is self-referential like any other name, being the sign of a reflexive relation between reality and possible worlds: 'every world', Kripke explains, 'is *possible* relative to itself'.<sup>27</sup> But the palindromic set of letters allows further speculations on the mirror function of the main character as a double of the writer, whose existence is coextensive with his fictional possible worlds.

In a fictional framework, reflexive symmetry may also exhibit a fundamental linguistic rule, which brings literature back to the epistemic function and structure of language: each and every sign becomes meaningful in a system of oppositions. At a higher level, the same happens in the formation of mythologies. The oppositional narrative of the cosmicomic universe becomes apparent when we consider the rival names Qfwfq and Kgwqk in 'Un segno nello spazio', for instance, or Qfwfq and Pfwfp in 'Giochi senza fine'. These

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Carnap, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Lubomír Doležel, 'Proper Names, Definite Descriptions and the Intensional Structure of Kafka's *The Trial*', *Poetics*, 12 (1983), 511–26 (pp. 517–18).

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Chubb, *I, Writer, I, Reader: The Concept of Self in the Fiction of Italo Calvino* (Leicester: Troubadour, 1997), p. 24.

<sup>27</sup> Kripke, 'Semantical Considerations', p. 64.

symmetrical names clearly rule out the possibility of a random choice of letters: once the sign 'Qfwfq' has been introduced in the fictional universe, other names follow in a systematic relationship.

The set of letters composing Qfwfq as the 'first sign' is, of course, a much more complicated choice, as Calvino ruminates in 'Un segno':

La forma da dare al segno, voi dite non è un problema perché, qualsiasi forma abbia, un segno basta serva da segno, cioè sia diverso oppure uguale ad altri segni: anche qui voi fate presto a parlare, ma io a quell'epoca non avevo esempi a cui rifarmi per dire lo faccio uguale o lo faccio diverso, cose da copiare non ce n'erano, e neppure una linea, retta o curva che fosse, si sapeva cos'era, o un punto, o una sporgenza o rientranza. Avevo l'intenzione di fare un segno, questo sì, ossia avevo l'intenzione di considerare segno una qualsiasi cosa che mi venisse fatto di fare, quindi avendo io, in quel punto dello spazio e non in un altro, fatto qualcosa intendendo di fare un segno, risultò che ci avevo fatto un segno davvero. (RR, II, 108)

Typographical symmetry finally suggests two more speculative possibilities: using a typewriter to select random letters, the Italian keyboard QZERTY—as opposed to the standard American keyboard—would allow the typing of 'Qfwfq' by a symmetrical movement on the three alphabetical rows. In cursive writing, on the other hand, letters are logically connected by some intensional form of wording. Let us suppose that the intensional character is the name 'Kafka': the story 'Un segno' would let us assume that this choice is not unmotivated.

As Calvino acknowledged in his 1965 letter to Garroni, the composition of this story was particularly long and difficult. 'Un segno nello spazio' was first published in the journal *Il Caffè* in 1964, and a year later, with some changes, in the volume of *Le cosmicomiche*. One of these changes is particularly meaningful for my argument: in the first version the name of the semiotic antagonist of Qfwfq is not Kgwqk, but 'Kfwfk' (see RR, II, 1329). Did Calvino change it because of his semantic anxiety, to avoid summoning up the name of Kafka? To be sure, 'il nome fu dedotto in seguito, nella più tarda epoca dei nomi' (RR, II, 113). In the clustered index of possible precursors and influences, however, the first sign witnesses what will be expressed by Calvino ten years later, in *La taverna dei destini incrociati* (1973), namely that 'la parola scritta tiene sempre presente la cancellatura della persona che ha scritto o di quella che leggerà' (RR, II, 597).

#### *Worlds of Possibility, Levels of Reality*

In the lower part of a manuscript page of *Le cosmicomiche*, Calvino noted that Qfwfq is a character in so far as it is 'una costante stilistica e di rapporto con la realtà'.<sup>28</sup> In terms of possible-worlds semantics, we could say that it is a

<sup>28</sup> *Album Calvino*, ed. by Luca Baranelli and Ernesto Ferrero (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), p. 195.

constant—say, a rigid designator—which allows trans-world identification. Its reference to the real world is expressed through a ‘reflexive relation on K’,<sup>29</sup> which Calvino specifically sees as a stylistic (intensional) function: without the identification of Qfwfq’s first sign, in fact, this relation is inscribed into reality but difficult to read, like the ‘gamba male inchiostrata della lettera R che in una copia d’un giornale della sera s’incontrava con una scoria filamentosa della carta’ (RR, II, 117).

We have to make a distinction between the reflexive relation and reality itself, but on what basis? In his book *Heterocosmica*, Doležel explains that possible-worlds semantics provides a consistent theoretic model of fictionality, but must reject mimetic or naïve realism:

Mimetic reading, practised by naïve readers and reinforced by journalistic critics, is one of the most reductive operations of which the human mind is capable: the vast, open, and inviting universe of fictional discourse is shrunk to the model of one single world, actual human experience. Even if its sole merit were to offer an alternative to the doctrine of mimesis, possible-worlds semantics of fictionality deserves a hearing.<sup>30</sup>

This does not mean that realism should be abandoned, quite the contrary. It simply means that possible worlds may be logically treated as ‘real’. As Christopher Norris puts it, modal realism is ‘a promising alternative to some of the more extreme anti-realist or discourse-relativist positions that have occupied the high ground of literary theory over the past two decades’.<sup>31</sup>

One of the issues that Kripke’s model helped to overcome is precisely the logical interpretation of sentences concerning non-existent entities, like the round square or any fictional character, which the philosopher later preferred to call ‘unactualized possible entities’, according to his famous example: ‘Holmes does not exist, but in other states of affairs, he would have existed.’<sup>32</sup> Fictional existence proves the insufficiency of one-world realism.

We can quote in this connection the letter that Calvino sent to François Wahl in 1960, concerning the translation of his novel *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1959): ‘Je ne dis jamais que le chevalier est irréel. Je dis qu’il n’existe pas. Ça c’est très différent’ (L, p. 684). Despite his empty armour, Calvino’s knight is not what Bertrand Russell would call an ‘empty term’—like ‘the present king of Italy’, who may be bald but does not exist, as Russell would say. Possible-worlds semantics makes it possible to hold on to the meaning of non-existent entities despite the apparent lack of reference in the actual world, because it

<sup>29</sup> See above, at n. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. x.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Norris, *Fiction, Philosophy and Literary Theory: Will the Real Saul Kripke Please Stand Up?* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Kripke, ‘Semantical Considerations’, p. 65; cf. *ibid.*, p. 172.

explains that a fictional world does not pre-exist but is semantically constructed by the text.

In the same year as Calvino's *Cavaliere inesistente*, namely 1959, Sergio Solmi and Carlo Fruttero published a very successful collection of science fiction stories which had a noteworthy title: *Le meraviglie del possibile*. In his introduction Solmi emphasized that the possible worlds imagined by American science fiction had a connection with the Spanish literature of the *conquista*: 'Allora era la scoperta e la conquista del Nuovo Mondo [. . .]; oggi è la scoperta dei nuovi mondi che la scienza dell'atomo, l'astronautica, la nuova biologia ci lasciano intravedere.'<sup>33</sup> A prominent example would be *La galassia 'Quijote'*, as Aldo Ruffinatto calls it, which connects historic reality and the possible worlds of chivalric literature.<sup>34</sup> And in fact, Solmi and Fruttero wanted their book to inaugurate an ideal library 'in attesa che la *science fiction* crei finalmente il suo Chisciotte'.<sup>35</sup>

Calvino shared this vision, and Qfwfq can certainly be seen as a kind of cosmicomic Quijote, but not in the territory of science fiction. In the introduction to *La memoria del mondo*, the writer explained that the main difference between the cosmicomic stories and science fiction is in the different relationship to reality, considering the scientific description of the actual world as the starting-point from which to imagine other possible worlds:

Io vorrei servirmi del dato scientifico come d'una carica propulsiva per uscire dalle abitudini dell'immaginazione, e vivere magari il quotidiano nei termini più lontani dalla nostra esperienza; la fantascienza invece mi pare che tenda ad avvicinare ciò che è lontano, ciò che è difficile da immaginare, che tenda a dargli una dimensione realistica o comunque a farlo entrare in un orizzonte d'immaginazione che fa parte già d'un'abitudine accettata. (RR, II, 1300)

In other words, science fiction tends to mimetic reduction. As shown by Massimo Bucciantini, later developments in the genre confirmed Calvino's opinion, 'facendo passare in secondo piano la fantascienza come viaggio spaziale e avventura cosmica e quindi rendendo sempre più esigui i suoi rapporti con il romanzo cavalleresco'.<sup>36</sup> A realistic description of possible worlds ought not to overlook the fact that fantasy is a narrative 'mode' rather than a genre, as pointed out by Remo Ceserani,<sup>37</sup> and calls for a pertinent modal theory.

In the article 'Definizione di territori: il fantastico', written on the occasion of the publication of Tzvetan Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*

<sup>33</sup> *Le meraviglie del possibile: antologia della fantascienza*, ed. by Sergio Solmi and Carlo Fruttero (1959), 2nd edn (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), p. ix.

<sup>34</sup> Aldo Ruffinatto, *La galassia 'Quijote': in margine ai mondi possibili dell'ingegnoso idalgo* (Turin: Giappichelli, 1983), pp. 21–22.

<sup>35</sup> Solmi and Fruttero, p. xix.

<sup>36</sup> Massimo Bucciantini, *Italo Calvino e la scienza: gli alfabeti del mondo* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007), p. 22, n. 43.

<sup>37</sup> Remo Ceserani, *Il fantastico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), p. 112.

(1970), Calvino made the point that the Italian words 'fantasia' and 'fantastico' do not imply the reader's belief in the fictional world, but 'implicano al contrario una presa di distanza, una levitazione, l'accettazione di una logica che porta su altri oggetti e altri nessi da quelli dell'esperienza quotidiana'.<sup>38</sup> The only Italian example that Calvino provided of this fantastic logic was Ariosto, but among its modern parallels we find the name of Kafka. It is not simply because Kafka foreshadows the specific 'ossessione del trascendente' which characterizes science fiction, as Solmi pointed out.<sup>39</sup>

The connection between Kafka and Ariosto becomes clear in the first of Calvino's *Lezioni americane* (1988), on the literary value of 'lightness', which ends with Kafka's short story *Der Kübelreiter* (1917). The 'Bucket Rider' brings back to life the knightly dimension of the Ariostesque world, and at the same time represents the 'levitazione' of fantasy (S, p. 655) which makes the reader see the world beyond everyday reality, at a higher level of understanding of the laws we live by.

More technically, according to Marie-Laure Ryan, Kafka's 'realistic fantasy' is characterized by the break-up of physical and taxonomic compatibility between the actual and the textual world, a suspension of natural laws which creates an 'undecidable' reality:

The text may present what Thomas Pavel (1986) calls a 'dual' or 'layered' ontology: the domain of the actual is split into sharply distinct domains obeying different laws, such as the sacred and the profane in medieval mystery plays, or the visible world (everyday life) versus the world of the invisible (the Court, the Castle) in Kafka's novels (Doležel 1983). Unlike the private worlds of the characters' mental constructs, 'the Sacred' or 'the Invisible' are not alternative possible worlds located at the periphery of the textual system, but complementary territories within the central world. In Kafka's novels, TAW [=Textual Actual World] is split between a realistic sphere [. . .] and a sphere of undecidable relation to AW [=Actual World].<sup>40</sup>

We have already seen that the cosmicomic semantics, as opposed to the semi-otic structure, involves 'libero gioco su vari piani'. These are levels of realistic fantasy. In his paper on 'I livelli della realtà in letteratura' (1978), Calvino concluded that 'la letteratura non conosce la realtà ma solo *livelli*. Se esista la realtà di cui i livelli non sono che aspetti parziali, o se esistano solo i livelli, questo la letteratura non può deciderlo' (S, p. 398). As a matter of fact, this theory of the 'levels of reality' can be recast by translating Kripke's model

<sup>38</sup> Italo Calvino, *Saggi 1945-1985*, ed. by Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), p. 266 (henceforth abbreviated as S); Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

<sup>39</sup> Solmi and Fruttero, p. xvi.

<sup>40</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 40. Ryan's references are to Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), and Lubomír Doležel, 'Intensional Function, Invisible Worlds, and Franz Kafka', *Style*, 17 (1983), 120-41.

theory of possible worlds into the specific language of the fictional worlds of literature.

If the experience of the 'written universe' is primarily centred in the one-person world, all different ontological layers unfold from the 'one-layer universe' constituted by the fictional subject, as Pavel observed.<sup>41</sup> Doležel considers it 'the most felicitous and instructive starting point of fictional semantics'.<sup>42</sup> In a similar way, Calvino frames the so-called Homeric question within the intensional levels associated with a sentence such as 'Io scrivo che Ulisse ascolta il canto delle Sirene', and remarks:

nulla cambierebbe se 'io' fossi io che vi parlo e anche l'Omero di cui scrivo fossi sempre io, cioè se quello che attribuisco a Omero fosse una mia invenzione. Il procedimento risulterebbe subito chiaro se la frase suonasse: 'Io scrivo che Omero racconta che Ulisse scopre che le Sirene sono mute'. In questo caso per ottenere un determinato effetto letterario io attribuisco aprocrifamente a Omero un mio capovolgimento o deformazione o interpretazione del racconto omerico. (In realtà l'idea delle sirene silenziose è di Kafka; facciamo conto che l'*io* soggetto della frase sia Kafka.) (S, p. 386)

The lexical proximity of the Italian verbs 'contare' and 'raccontare' is important for the semantic calculus: 'Noterete che non ho scritto "Omero scrive" né "Omero canta" ma "Omero racconta", per lasciarmi aperte entrambe le possibilità' (S, pp. 385–86), namely the two alternative worlds of the *Odyssey* and of its legendary author, duplicated by Kafka's rewriting of the myth. When Calvino writes 'facciamo conto', the interpretative supposition that Kafka may be the writing subject splits the ontological assumption of 'I am' into the reflexive speech-act 'I am writing', which logically belongs to the same intensional field of the fictional characters. Accordingly, in the *Cosmicomiche* we can also assume a set of possible worlds in which the semantic interpretation of Qfwfq is Kafka.

In the example, the embedded reference is to Kafka's parable *Das Schweigen der Sirenen* (1917)—parodied by Queneau in his *Chant du styrène* (1957), which Calvino eventually translated in 1985. Calvino uses Kafka's parable to point out a very important semantic principle: 'stiamo attenti a non confondere livelli di realtà (interni all'opera) con livelli di verità (in riferimento a un "fuori")' (S, pp. 387–88). The conflation of reality and truth-values is common to mimesis and science fiction. On the contrary, Kafka is the best example of that highly disciplined and finely balanced style which is realistic fantasy, which requires detachment and lightness, that is to say the ability to 'leggere il mondo su molteplici livelli e in molteplici linguaggi simultaneamente' (S, p. 1677).

But what is the language in which today's world is written? Calvino asked

<sup>41</sup> Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, pp. 62–63.

<sup>42</sup> Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, p. 37.



this question in his lecture 'The Written and the Unwritten World', delivered at New York University in 1983, and argued that our 'mondo quotidiano' cannot be described any longer with the mathematical precision of Galileo, but rather appears as a palimpsest rewritten several times in different languages and alphabets. In this multi-layered written world, only realistic fantasy, and not mimesis, can be the right 'mode' for literature: 'La vera sfida per uno scrittore è parlare dell'intricato groviglio della nostra situazione usando un linguaggio che sembri tanto trasparente da creare un senso d'allucinazione, come è riuscito a fare Kafka' (S, p. 1872).

*'Amerika': Kafka with Collodi*

At this point, before we investigate further hypotheses, it may be worthwhile to clarify again that I am not implying that Kafka is a Saussurian *mot sous le mot*, or a 'cipher', like Chichita Singer for the name 'Priscilla Langwood' at the end of the story 'Mitosi'.<sup>43</sup> Nor am I (simply) trying to add his name to the all too long list of authors who contributed to the genesis of the *Cosmicomiche*. I am rather maintaining that we can refer Qfwfq's narrative mode to Kafka as a semantic model for a unified interpretation of the cosmicomic project. In other words, Kafka's name is only a model relative to the interpretation of Qfwfq's possible worlds. With Sylvère Lotringer, I would say that the name 'is only the fictive framework of the germinative process, a "construction" by means of which the heterogeneous can be read at the risk of being taken at its word'.<sup>44</sup>

A list of the main influences and inspirational sources of the *Cosmicomiche* was provided by Calvino himself in a note to the first edition, in which he mentioned Leopardi, Popeye, Beckett, Bruno, Carroll, Matta, Landolfi, Kant, Borges, and Grandville (RR, II, 1322). Should we limit the research to this rather desultory—and perhaps not entirely serious—list? It would be pointless. Roberto Bertoni, for instance, put forward three other important authors who shed light on the main character's name:

Queneau, Fourier, Vittorini (le cui iniziali, sia concessa qui tra parentesi un'ipotesi so-spesa scetticamente in un ambito congetturale fantastico, potrebbero anche incarnarsi nelle lettere Q, f, v della prima metà del nome Qfwfq rispondendosi specularmente nella seconda metà v, f, q ...).<sup>45</sup>

Queneau is the ideal point of departure (and arrival) for Calvino's literary experimentation, because 'quella di Q. è pur sempre una lettura antropomorfa

<sup>43</sup> See Martin McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 87.

<sup>44</sup> Sylvère Lotringer, 'The Game of the Name', *Diacritics*, 3 (1973), 2–9 (p. 8).

<sup>45</sup> Roberto Bertoni, *Int'abrigu int'ubagu: discorso su alcuni aspetti dell'opera di Italo Calvino*, (Turin: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1993), p. 93.

o meglio antropotelica della storia naturale', as he wrote in his little guide to the *Petite cosmogonie portative* (1950).<sup>46</sup> Charles Fourier is, without any doubt, an important name in this universe 'framed by desire as the key motive force', as suggested by Martin McLaughlin.<sup>47</sup> And Elio Vittorini represents an ideological turning-point in the literary debate about the 'two cultures', which he would later call *Le due tensioni*.<sup>48</sup> Bertoni gives details to better appreciate the influence of these three authors, but the list remains necessarily incomplete.

One of the relevant missing names, for instance, is Giorgio de Santillana. In a 1984 interview Calvino recalled that he first met Santillana in Boston in 1960, and three years later again in Turin, attending his lecture on 'Fato antico e fato moderno': 'Fu allora che cominciai a scrivere le *Cosmicomiche*' (RR, II, 1320). With the writer's authentication, the origin of the cosmicomic stories can be traced back to Santillana's lecture in the same sense that Vittorini's initial may be inscribed, as a symbol of the 'double bind' of scientific and literary imagination, at the centre of the name Qfwfq.

Beyond Santillana, the importance of Calvino's American experience for the composition of *Le cosmicomiche* is clear. As the thirty-seven-year-old Calvino, recipient of a grant from the Ford Foundation, sailed into the harbour of New York, a new chapter in his intellectual life began. There was, initially, the sheer enthusiasm for the powerful computers which were transporting and translating the old written world into the era of information technology, opening up unparalleled possibilities for literary imagination.<sup>49</sup> Above all, this meant the discovery of a new modern epic, as later symbolized e.g. by Kafka's *Kübelreiter*. Back from the States, Qfwfq will give literary evidence to Einstein's dream of riding a beam of light through the universe, 'caracollando sulle orbite planetarie e stellari come in sella ad un cavallo dagli zoccoli sprizzanti scintille' (RR, II, 112).

Although Kafka is not explicitly mentioned in Calvino's American reportages, we can certainly link Kafka's *Amerika* (1927) to the genesis of the *Cosmicomiche*. Of course, the choice of this writer over other names—say Queneau, 'citato con frequenza' during the 1960s (S, pp. 404–05), or a post-modern author such as Thomas Pynchon<sup>50</sup>—needs stronger evidence. An

<sup>46</sup> Italo Calvino, 'Piccola guida alla Piccola cosmogonia', in Raymond Queneau, *Piccola cosmogonia portatile*, trans. by Sergio Solmi, 2nd edn (Turin: Einaudi, 1988), pp. 145–83 (p. 175).

<sup>47</sup> McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino*, p. 83.

<sup>48</sup> See Elio Vittorini, *Le due tensioni: appunti per una ideologia della letteratura*, ed. by Dante Isella (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1967), p. 93.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Jonathan Usher, 'Calvino and the Computer as Writer/Reader', *MLR*, 90 (1995), 41–54 (pp. 49–50).

<sup>50</sup> See Paolo Zanotti, '“Gli universi si fanno e si disfano ma è sempre lo stesso materiale che gira”: appunti sulle eterotopie cosmicomiche di Calvino e un'ipotesi su Calvino e Pynchon', *Trame*, 3–4 (2002), 214–44.

obvious starting-point would be to assess the importance that Kafka had for Calvino, from the very first writings to the last, unwritten American lecture, which included *Amerika* as a main reference.

In the well-known interview with Maria Corti in 1985, Calvino mentioned Kafka as one of the two main authors of his 'biblioteca "genetica"', together with Carlo Collodi:

Se una continuità può essere ravvisata nella mia prima formazione — diciamo tra i sei e i ventitré anni — è quella che va da *Pinocchio* a *America* di Kafka, altro libro decisivo della mia vita, che ho sempre considerato 'il romanzo' per eccellenza nella letteratura mondiale del Novecento e forse non solo in quella. L'elemento unificante potrebbe essere definito così: avventura e solitudine di un individuo sperduto nella vastità del mondo, verso una iniziazione e autocostruzione interiore. (S, p. 2921)

We could express the unifying element of *Le cosmicomiche* in the same terms, and draw from this analogy an interpretative 'isotopy'<sup>51</sup> between Qfwfq and Kafka. The adjective 'sperduto' specifically refers to the working title of Kafka's American novel, *Der Verschollene*. In a (finally discarded) note for the third of his American lectures, Calvino described the meaning of this novel as follows:

La storia dell'uomo nell'universo degli altri. Carl [sic] Rossmann non può seguire un suo cammino senza che la presenza di qualcun altro non intervenga a deviarlo. [. . .] Il titolo che K. voleva dare al racconto era *Il disperso*: è un processo di perdita di identificazione (sociale) che il libro racconta (per un'identificazione con l'essenza vera di sé?). (S, pp. 2979–80)

In the first name of *Amerika*'s protagonist, here Italianized as 'Carl', we can arguably infer a process of intellectual identification between Calvino and Kafka, mediated by the trans-world reference of the fictional character to the author of *Pinocchio*, Carlo Collodi. Alain Montandon has given some reason to suppose that Kafka's allusion to Collodi may be intentional.<sup>52</sup> But the combination of Collodi and Kafka strikes other resonant chords, revealing a deep connection between the first cosmicomic stories and Calvino's own first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947).

For a start, in the author's note for the second edition of this novel, in 1964, Calvino attached a portrait of himself as a young artist, 'e qui lo vediamo mentre gira per Praga e interroga il fantasma di Kafka'.<sup>53</sup> So, if the protagonist of *Il sentiero* carries the rather conspicuous name Pin, which is a clear allusion to Collodi's picaresque hero, the name of Kafka in the author's note signals the particular interpretation of realism that the young author was trying to achieve.

<sup>51</sup> See Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 63.

<sup>52</sup> Alain Montandon, 'Pinocchio en Amérique: *Le Disparu* de Franz Kafka à la lumière de Collodi', in *Pinocchio: entre texte et image*, ed. by Jean Perrot (Brussels: Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes, 2003), pp. 241–51.

<sup>53</sup> *Album Calvino*, p. 89.

Almost two decades later, in the important 1964 preface to the second edition of *Il sentiero*, Calvino looked back and concluded that ‘il primo libro sarebbe meglio non averlo mai scritto’ (RR, 1, 1202). At the same time, he was writing the first stories of *Le cosmicomiche*, later published with a reproduction of Escher’s *Un autre monde* on the cover—a woodcut print which, coincidentally, dates back to the same year 1947.<sup>54</sup>

According to Carla Benedetti, the seminal story ‘Un segno nello spazio’ precisely represents the ambivalent relationship that the writer developed with his first novel, expressing his ‘embarrassment’ at its old-fashioned feel of neorealism:

Come Qfwfq, anche lo scrittore Calvino sarà destinato a non poter ‘ritrovare’ il primo segno. La parola direttamente intenzionale che contraddistingueva la prima opera è ora vissuta con disagio, ora che un secondo occhio è pronto a giudicarla alla luce di ciò che si sarebbe scritto dopo, e a decretarne l’ingenuità.<sup>55</sup>

As far as this reassessment bears evidence against naive realism, Kafka’s ‘fantasma’ may also figure as a stylistic spectrum in the name Qfwfq, pinpointing its literary function in the territory of realistic fantasy as Calvino, in keeping with Collodi, understands it (S, pp. 1680–81). In this spectrum, the constant Qfwfq describes the process of ‘dispersion’ of self-images through the possible worlds of literature, in a vast textual universe before and beyond the existence of human life.

#### *If Castle: The Prison-House of a ‘Conte’*

If the intensional naming system structures the fictional world and contributes to the sense of its literary macro-structures, the semantic interpretation of Qfwfq as Kafka should become most apparent when the intensional regularity of *Le cosmicomiche* is broken and systematically shifted towards a meta-literary discourse, as Doležel argued for the famous final parable of Kafka’s *Prozess* (1925).<sup>56</sup> The same holds true for the *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove*, and in particular for its very last story, which provides a clue for a new interpretation of Qfwfq as Kafka, ‘Il conte di Montecristo’.

Calvino acknowledged the ‘kafkismo del *Montecristo*’ in a 1968 letter to Luigi Baldacci: ‘mi ricollegavo intenzionalmente a Kafka proponendo una assoluta spersonalizzazione come unica via d’uscita’ (L, p. 982). The following

<sup>54</sup> See Mario Barenghi, ‘From Picasso to Dürer: Calvino’s Book Covers’, in Grundtvig and others, pp. 201–11 (p. 206).

<sup>55</sup> Carla Benedetti, ‘Calvino e i segni dell’autore’, in *Piccole finzioni con importanza: valori della narrativa italiana contemporanea*, ed. by Nathalie Roelens and Inge Lanslots (Ravenna: Longo, 1993), pp. 79–102 (p. 97).

<sup>56</sup> Doležel, ‘Proper Names’, p. 524.

year, in a letter to Mario Boselli, the writer confirmed and developed the same point:

sì, il mio Montecristo vuole uscire dalla drammaticità esistenziale, spersonalizzare la sua tensione, come condizione necessaria per uscire dalla prigione. E a ben vedere anche K. — o meglio: lo stile di astratta precisione di Kafka — era un passo decisivo in questa direzione; Kafka può essere letto nei due modi: come 'storia di un'anima' o/e come descrizione d'una rete di rapporti oggettivi, e io credo che la seconda sia più importante. (L, p. 1063)

Kafka's striving for an objective and impersonal style is well known. Following his stylistic research, the name of the protagonist of his last novel, *Das Schloss* (1926), was changed from the first to the third person, as Max Brod reports in his prefatory note, inserting K. 'in the place of "I"'.<sup>57</sup> More than for the obvious mirror function of the initial as regards the writer's name, then, this literary device is important because it singles out the intensional functioning of the protagonist's name from the normal system of fictional names.

In 'Il conte' the quest for objectivity is also expressed through the fact that the 'real' protagonist is the deuteragonist, the empirical Abbot Faria, who performs the same function of Qfwfq as opposed to the speculative writer, bearing on the same fictional necessity:

Ogni mia ipotesi di fuga, cerco d'immaginarla con Faria come protagonista. Non che io tenda a identificarmi con lui: Faria è un personaggio necessario perché io possa rappresentare alla mia mente l'evasione in una luce obiettiva, come non riuscirei a fare vivendola: dico, sognandola in prima persona. Ormai non so più se quello che sento scavare come una talpa è il vero Faria che apre brecce nelle mura della vera fortezza d'If o è l'ipotesi di un Faria alle prese d'una fortezza ipotetica. Il conto comunque torna lo stesso: è la fortezza quella che vince. È come se, nelle partite tra Faria e la fortezza, io spingessi tanto oltre la mia imparzialità da tenere per la fortezza contro di lui... no, adesso esagero: la partita non si svolge soltanto nella mia mente, ma tra due contendenti reali, indipendentemente da me; il mio sforzo è inteso a vederla con distacco, in una rappresentazione senza angoscia. (RR, II, 348–49)

As in Kafka's novel, we could say, the Castle always wins the literary game, but the story is more important than victory: 'Il conto comunque torna lo stesso'. For that reason, once again, 'facciamo conto che l'io soggetto della frase sia Kafka'. Let us read this story as a counterfactual analysis of a *conte fantastique*, which summarizes the non-mimetic relation of literature to reality and maybe, as Todorov maintains, the relation of language to the world.

Calvino's reference to Kafka is a significant clue for interpretation. And yet, of course, it cannot be a sufficient reason to read 'Il conte' as a cosmicomic story. The main difference is that this story is not centred on the actual world

<sup>57</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Penguin Complete Novels: 'The Trial', 'The Castle', 'America'*, trans. by Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 181.

as described by a scientific theory, but derives from an entirely fictional world, that of Alexandre Dumas's *Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1844–45). Relative to this world, the author of the *Comte* is also a stipulated entity: 'Chiamiamo Alexandre Dumas lo scrittore che deve consegnare al più presto al suo editore un romanzo in dodici tomi intitolato *Il conte di Montecristo*' (RR, II, 354). Accordingly, the main character of 'Il conte' is not Qfwfq, nor any similar string of letters, but the pre-existing Edmond Dantès, future Count of Monte Cristo.

Lino Gabellone aptly defined this last character as 'un *puro nome*, o meglio un tracciato nominale che collega tra loro diversi stati, diversi punti di una serie'.<sup>58</sup> Can we still recognize Qfwfq's voice in this nominal trace? Or shall we assume the stipulated author as the only unifying element of the cosmicomic universe, from the initial collection of twelve stories up to the *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove*? If so, without any doubt, Qfwfq disappears in a meta-fictional world in which the model reader can be interpreted as Kafka.

In the first collection of cosmicomic stories the meta-fictional model was also represented through the last story, 'La spirale'. Towards the end of 'Il conte' we find a clear reference to the structure of a spiral, which can be interpreted in terms of possible-worlds semantics:

Una spirale può girare su se stessa verso il dentro o verso il fuori: se si avvita all'interno di se stessa, la storia si chiude senza sviluppo possibile; se si svolge in spire che si allargano potrebbe a ogni giro includere un segmento del *Montecristo* col segno più, finendo per coincidere col romanzo che Dumas darà alle stampe, o magari per superarlo nella ricchezza delle occasioni fortunate. La differenza decisiva tra i due libri — tale da farli definire l'uno vero e l'altro falso anche se identici — starà tutta nel metodo. Per progettare un libro — o un'evasione — la prima cosa è sapere cosa escludere. (RR, II, 355–56)

The difference between the two books depends on their position in the modal calculus, and their respective truth-value can be assessed only in a system of possible worlds, not in absolute terms. Calvino's 'Conte' is possible relative to the actual existence of Dumas's *Comte*, which, in turn, can be constructed only by way of systematic exclusions, i.e. through a narrative selection of its possibilities according to a 'principle of relevance'.<sup>59</sup>

The spiral-reading of the cosmicomic universe allows us to draw a narrative link from 'Un segno' to 'Il conte' at different levels of the same central textual world, viz. the same 'fortezza concentrica' (RR, II, 355). It is the 'raggera di possibili significati', as Calvino defined it in the aforementioned letter to Garroni, that connects the typographical 'simmetria bilaterale' of Qfwfq to the thematic structure of a 'simmetria raggiata' (RR, II, 207).<sup>60</sup> Elaborat-

<sup>58</sup> Lino Gabellone, 'Aporie del raccontare', *Nuova Corrente*, 34 (1987), 125–46 (p. 133).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, p. 145.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Ilene T. Olken, *With Pleated Eye and Garnet Wings: Symmetries of Italo Calvino* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), pp. 51–52.

ing on an interview given by the author in 1965, Claudio Milanini further explains:

La decisione di chiudere il libro con 'La spirale' derivava dalla volontà di alludere alle plurime possibilità di sviluppo di una ricerca artistica che, pur traendo linfa da tensioni e angosce provocate dal mondo reale, si sarebbe poi dilatata in una combinatoria pressoché inesauribile d'invenzioni e d'immagini controfattuali. (RR, II, 1323)

In a counterfactual theory, the actual world is conceived and described as it might have been (but is not). This is a more technical definition of the possible-worlds model, as Kripke pointed out: 'if one wishes to avoid the *Weltangst* and philosophical confusions that many philosophers have associated with the "worlds" terminology, I recommended that "possible state (or history) of the world", or "counterfactual situation" might be better'.<sup>61</sup>

Unlike science fiction scenarios, possible worlds are not versions of the world as it might be in the future, but counterfactual statements which make a point about the world as it is, considering that it might have been different. Accordingly, in Calvino's 'Conte' the narrative development of the title-protagonist is arrested in one of the central chapters of Dumas's *Comte*, and his fictional task is to map out possible escapes from the If Castle. After all, just as Dantès was imprisoned for a crime that he did not commit, the writer is entangled in a novel that he has not yet completed. The author's meta-fictional task consists in selecting narrative segments of the character's future from 'tutte le varianti possibili d'uno smisurato iper-romanzo' (RR, II, 354), although he knows that, outside the prison-*conte*, future and past eventually coincide.

Likewise, when Kafka writes that the Sirens are silent, he makes a counterfactual statement on the Homeric world as it might have been. And even if Kripke 'could no longer write' that Holmes would have existed in other states of affairs, yet he can maintain that 'there might have been entities other than those which exist'.<sup>62</sup> Oddly enough, this is something that fictional characters share with the actual world, as explained by Simon Blackburn: 'It is arguably distinctive of laws of nature that they yield to counterfactuals ("if the metal were to be heated, it would expand"), whereas accidentally true generalizations may not'.<sup>63</sup> Kafka's realistic fantasy consists in this counterfactual representation of human constructs—such as positive laws and habits—as natural laws.

In this framework, Homer can be replaced with Kafka because the theoretic model is simply meant to make a point about narrative structures. The use

<sup>61</sup> Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> 'Semantical Considerations', p. 172.

<sup>63</sup> Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 82.



of fictional names is only 'il primo gradino della grammatica e della sintassi narrativa' (S, p. 208), as Calvino argued in his conference on literature as a 'combinatorial game', 'Cibernetica e fantasmi' (1967), which he notably concluded with a quotation from the ending of 'Il conte':

Se riuscirò col pensiero a costruire una fortezza da cui è impossibile fuggire, questa fortezza pensata o sarà uguale alla vera — e in questo caso è certo che di qui non fuggiremo mai; ma almeno avremo raggiunto la tranquillità di chi sa che sta qui perché non potrebbe trovarsi altrove — o sarà una fortezza dalla quale la fuga è ancora più impossibile che di qui — e allora è segno che qui una possibilità di fuga esiste: basterà individuare il punto in cui la fortezza pensata non coincide con quella vera per trovarla. (RR, II, 356; cf. S, pp. 224–25)

Since there is no impossible world in fiction, we shall assume that the impossibility of escaping from the If Castle depends on some restrictions of the accessibility relations to its possible worlds: 'Tra un'isola da cui non si può uscire e un'isola da cui non si può entrare ci deve essere un rapporto' (RR, II, 352). The paradox is that the map of If and the map of Montecristo designate the same island, that is to say 'il luogo della molteplicità delle cose possibili' (ibid.). Using Ryan's terminology, we can say that the main restriction is in chronological and physical compatibility,<sup>64</sup> which mark the difference between science fiction and realistic fantasy.

When the distance between the real and the fictional world is drastically reduced, the model reader becomes a protagonist. This is what clearly happens in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979), where the aspiration to an absolute third-person subject is emphatically expressed by Silas Flannery in his diary: 'Come scriverei bene se non ci fossi!' (RR, II, 779).<sup>65</sup> However, distance can be reduced but not altogether removed, since it is a necessary condition for fiction. According to Pavel, when this happens the principle of relevance undergoes a radical transformation, from inferential practice to more complex literary systems: this is the reason why we can read Kafka's *Castle* 'as an undetermined parable of the human condition'.<sup>66</sup>

### *The Labyrinth: Calvino and Leibniz*

An interpretation of *Le cosmicomiche* in terms of possible-worlds fiction theory does not need us to establish a direct relationship between Calvino and Leibniz. This should be obvious. Before drawing to a conclusion, nevertheless, a brief digression may be expedient to show that this relationship is also rather problematic.

<sup>64</sup> See Ryan, *Possible Worlds*, pp. 32–33.

<sup>65</sup> On this point see Benedetti, among others.

<sup>66</sup> Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, p. 146.

For a start, Calvino reads Leibniz within the Galilean project which defines the paradigm of modern science, aimed at reducing the complexity of the world to one universal language. But Galileo, like Dante, ‘cercava attraverso la parola letteraria di costruire un’immagine dell’universo’ (S, p. 232), while Leibniz, like Dantès in his prison cell *sans fenêtre*, ‘resta solo a sostenere la molteplicità dei mondi e a tendere l’orecchio a mille “voci matematiche” diverse’ (S, p. 2041).

Furthermore, Leibniz is usually associated, as a derivative source, with the work of Carlo Emilio Gadda. The combinatorial art of Leibniz enables Gadda to draw a ‘mappa o catalogo o enciclopedia del possibile’, but Calvino sees that it has a tragic outcome: ‘la complessità dei vorticosi processi di trasformazione s’espande in labirinti concentrici e non tarda ad aver ragione del più ostinato ottimismo gnoseologico’ (S, p. 253). Epistemic optimism is certainly vital for any conception of literature which strives for ‘un’immagine cosmica’ (S, p. 123), as Calvino stated in his important 1962 essay ‘La sfida al labirinto’. The difference is that for Calvino, unlike Gadda, the challenge is more important than the labyrinth.

We should probably shift the theoretical focus from the *Ars combinatoria* (1666) of Leibniz to his *Essais de théodicée* (1710). In the preface to this later work Leibniz distinguished ‘deux labyrinthes fameux’ where human reason often goes astray:

one concerns the great question of the Free and the Necessary, above all in the production and the origin of Evil; the other consists in the discussion of continuity, and of the indivisibles which appear to be the elements thereof, and where the consideration of the infinite must enter in. The first perplexes almost all the human race, the other exercises philosophers only.<sup>67</sup>

Even if the object of the *Essais* is necessity, and not continuity, the philosopher understands that the way out of the two labyrinths is the same, and entails the application of modal logic to a fictional continuum. The same intellectual embarrassment arises, in fact, when we consider the presence of evil in the actual world and the infinite set of numbers: are they both fictional entities?

By way of an answer, Leibniz concludes the treatise quoting in abstract a dialogue by Lorenzo Valla and ‘keeping up the fiction it initiated’, but also suggests one can ‘carry the little fable still further’.<sup>68</sup> The continuation of the *petite fable* is meant to show the reader that in order to understand the necessity of things we have to consider their possibility, and not by the ‘knowledge of vision’ but by ‘simple intelligence’. This finally amounts to acknowledging

<sup>67</sup> Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, trans. by E. M. Huggard (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 53.

<sup>68</sup> For the following quotations, see *ibid.*, §§ 369–73.

that the project of the *Théodicée* must fail, and the human mind should be content with the *Essais*—i.e. with the challenge to the labyrinth.

Leibniz's fable concerns a dream of the high priest Theodorus, who is transported to 'the palace of the fates' to be instructed on the case of Sextus Tarquinius. Each room of the palace is a different 'possible world' in which Theodorus finds different representations of Sextus, all existentially incomplete and therefore varied in the consequences of his fate. In each possible world there is a 'book of its fates', a hypertext which tells the history of that world, and a similar individual named Sextus, identified by a number on the forehead which also designates his place in the world-book: name and number, fiction and calculus correspond to each other. In the case of the name 'Sextus', the correspondence is obvious. But the name 'Theodorus' also involves hypertextual similarity, since the *Essais* were published anonymously and some of the first readers assumed the neologism 'Théodicée' as a pseudonym for the author. In both instances, similarity cannot motivate a name, but only its trans-world identification from the actual to the fictional world.

The *Théodicée* must end up in fiction, as required by its logical structure. However, it can be further argued that the fictional continuum of infinite name-numbers, in Leibniz's own terms, cannot be read. Peter Fenves clearly made this point while suggesting another continuation of Leibniz's tale, Kafka's short story *In der Strafkolonie* (1919):

For Kafka's fiction repeats the very same lesson as Leibniz—with almost the very same characters and with parodic allusions to the juridical context in which Leibniz resumes the fiction invented by the great Italian humanist [sc. Valla]. Yet Kafka's story, unlike Leibniz' fable, does not fail to emphasize that all instruction fails—not only the lesson concerning the justice of the original order but also the reading lesson [. . .]. That Kafka's fiction constitutes a continuation of Leibniz' is, of course, itself a fiction; but this fiction of continuation seeks to show the point at which the fictional continuum does not so much come to an end as suffer a nonfictive—and therefore effective—interruption.<sup>69</sup>

According to Leibniz's modal system, the actual world is a privileged member of the infinite set of all possible worlds because it is the only one which can justify existence in the name of reason, namely 'membership in the sole order of compossible individuals God could have brought into existence without making himself guilty of injustice in the court of reason. Every mark on the forehead can thus be read after all—as a sign of this guilt'.<sup>70</sup> This is what happens in Kafka's penal colony, where the 'sentence' is inscribed into the prisoner's body by an ingenious writing machine.

Fenves remarks that the operating instructions of Kafka's machine appear

<sup>69</sup> Peter Fenves, 'Continuing the Fiction: From Leibniz' "petite fable" to Kafka's "In der Strafkolonie"', *MLN*, 3 (2001), 502–20 (p. 504).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 511.

as a 'labyrinthartige' script, which can only be understood halfway into the sentence, from the sixth hour onwards<sup>71</sup>—that is, when Sextus corresponds to his 'just' name-number in Leibniz's fable. Incidentally, this may also be the name-number of the famous 'half-dozen of monkeys provided with typewriters', as suggested by Borges in 'The Total Library' (1939), which 'would, in a few eternities, produce all the books in the British Museum'.<sup>72</sup>

It is worth noting that there are many similarities between Leibniz's *petite fable* and Calvino's *conte* of Monte Cristo, imprisoned in the infinite possible worlds of a book that still needs to be completed. In the end, the labyrinth of the theoretical script becomes meaningful by stipulating its continuity with the labyrinth of the fictional frame. Kafka's (fictional) continuation of Leibniz's fiction brings about a new scene of reading which is, finally, 'unambiguously legible'.<sup>73</sup> And the same is true for Calvino's resumption of Dumas's *conte*, which becomes a meta-fictional parable of the whole cosmicomic cycle.

#### *Parables: How Much Shall We Bet?*

In a 1982 paper Maria Luisa Di Felice defined *Le cosmicomiche* as 'parabole epistemologiche'.<sup>74</sup> The definition is insightful, but should be understood in a wider sense, as argued by Eugenio Bolongaro, 'playfully allowing interferences from the French *parabole*, and the Italian *parabola*, which mean both "parable" and "parabola"—a path through space, a horizon that also tells a story and has a moral'.<sup>75</sup>

In the first place, we can say that Qfwfq is the axis of reflexive symmetry of the cosmicomic parabola, whose focus is the vanishing-point of the Self. Its semiotic function, corresponding to the logical function of a rigid designator, is what the Oulipo group called a 'contraînte', a rigid point of view which determines compositional possibilities, as defined by Eco: 'in the first part of the curve, as the rule becomes more stringent this stimulates creativity, whereas beyond a certain point it blocks it definitively'.<sup>76</sup> In Calvino's literary production this extreme point was reached with *Le città invisibili* (1972), a year

<sup>71</sup> See Franz Kafka, *The Penguin Complete Short Stories*, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer (London: Lane, 1983), p. 150.

<sup>72</sup> Jorge L. Borges, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922–1986*, trans. by Eliot Weinberger (London: Lane, 2000), p. 215.

<sup>73</sup> Fenves, p. 519.

<sup>74</sup> Maria Luisa Di Felice, 'Le cosmicomiche di Italo Calvino come "parabole epistemologiche"', *Problemi*, 64 (1982), 122–41.

<sup>75</sup> Eugenio Bolongaro, *Italo Calvino and the Compass of Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 196.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Stefano Bartezzaghi, 'Calvino at Play: Rules and Games for Writing in Space', in Grundtvig and others, pp. 122–40 (p. 127). Cf. Anna Botta, 'Calvino and the Oulipo: An Italian Ghost in the Combinatory Machine?', *MLN*, 112 (1997), 81–89.

before the writer officially joined the Oulipo, and was a direct consequence of the new literary research of *Le cosmicomiche*.

Bolognaro further considers that the cosmicomic parabola involves a humanistic reflection 'on the nature and possibilities of parable', that is to say: 'What happens when fables are no longer true, or no longer know how to tell the truth? What happens when storytelling ceases to provide us with a human compass for the world?'<sup>77</sup>

For Calvino, constrained writing is not a game for its own sake, but must have a poetic effect and meet the historical conditions of meaning in terms of possible human experience, as stated in 'Cibernetica e fantasmi': it is 'gioco che a un certo punto si trova investito d'un significato inatteso' (S, p. 221). Precisely, Calvino's parabola is a semantic bet on a new humanistic parable: 'da ciò la mia scommessa di rappresentare antropomorficamente un universo in cui l'uomo non è mai esistito, anzi dove sembra estremamente improbabile che l'uomo possa mai esistere' (S, p. 706). We could say that the 'operazione Qfwfq' (cf. L, p. 1179) is a parabola of parables in the age of cybernetics.

In this sense, in the story 'Quanto scommettiamo' Qfwfq bets on the existence of the universe from the very beginning, when the logic of cybernetic feedback could no longer be applied. The paradox of the story is that the human point of view introduces in the actual universe a fundamental element of contingency, which can hardly be mastered. As a result, a complete description of the human world becomes impossible, or at least as possible as using a newspaper as graph paper to plot the parabola of alternative possible worlds. This is the world of (k)yK, who finally prevails on Qfwfq:

E sbandiera le pagine dei quotidiani, bianche e nere come lo spazio quando s'andavano formando le galassie, e gremite — come allora lo spazio — di corpuscoli isolati, circondati di vuoto, privi in sé di destinazione e di senso. E io penso a com'era bello allora, attraverso quel vuoto, tracciare rette e parabole, individuare il punto esatto, l'intersezione tra spazio e tempo in cui sarebbe scoccato l'avvenimento, incontestabile nello spicco del suo bagliore, mentre adesso gli avvenimenti vengono giù ininterrotti, come una colata di cemento, uno in colonna sull'altro, uno incastrato nell'altro, separati da titoli neri e incongrui, leggibili per più versi ma intrinsecamente illeggibili, una pasta d'avvenimenti senza forma né direzione, che circonda sommerge schiaccia ogni ragionamento. (RR, II, 162–63)

The essentially illegible universe of contingent existents and events reminds us of Balzac's *Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (1831), which, according to Calvino, represents not only 'una parabola sullo sviluppo dell'arte moderna' but also 'una parabola sulla letteratura' (S, p. 713). Balzac called this story a 'conte fantastique', but eventually included it in his collection of *Études philosophiques*. This change signals the writer's shift from traditional fantasy literature to

<sup>77</sup> Bolognaro, p. 196.

a new kind of realism, which Calvino describes as ‘potential’ literature, as follows:

La fantasia dell’artista è un mondo di potenzialità che nessuna opera riuscirà a mettere in atto; quello di cui facciamo esperienza vivendo è un altro mondo, che risponde ad altre forme d’ordine e di disordine; gli strati di parole che s’accumulano sulle pagine come gli strati di colore sulla tela sono un altro mondo ancora, anch’esso infinito, ma più governabile, meno refrattario a una forma. Il rapporto tra i tre mondi è quell’*indefinibile* di cui parlava Balzac: o meglio, noi lo diremmo *indecidibile*, come il paradosso di un insieme infinito che contiene altri insiemi infiniti. (S, pp. 712–13)

The source of Calvino’s knowledge of the set-paradox about undecidable systems is the book *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (1979), by Douglas Hofstadter.<sup>78</sup> The paradox originates from the problem of self-referential sets, which Hofstadter later developed to explain the ‘paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop’ which constitutes the Self.<sup>79</sup> But the very same idea can be expressed with another word by Kafka, from his note ‘Von den Gleichnissen’ (1917): *das Unfassbare*, the ‘incomprehensible’ of the parables. Kafka writes:

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: ‘Go over’, he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.<sup>80</sup>

It is arresting to think that Kafka drafted this little parable when Wittgenstein formulated the famous last proposition of the *Tractatus* (1921), translated by Charles K. Ogden as follows: ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.’<sup>81</sup>

More to the point of my paper, in the central section of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein defined the structure of language as the ‘logical picture’ (*logisches Bild*) of a possible state of affairs, and explained that a name is meaningful only within this structure, as an argument of its logical image function. He then extended this to solve the paradox of self-referential sets. Accordingly, if we consider Kafka as a recursive argument of Qfwfq’s stylistic function, we should ask what its logical image is, and the question about its meaning can be phrased as follows: does a parabola of parables still function as a parable?

<sup>78</sup> Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979). The best example of this paradox is probably Groucho Marx’s resignation joke: ‘I don’t want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member.’

<sup>79</sup> Douglas R. Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), p. 102.

<sup>80</sup> Kafka, *Short Stories*, p. 457.

<sup>81</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by Charles K. Ogden (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), p. 157.

In a letter to Franco Rella, reviewing the manuscript of his book *Metamorfosi: immagini del pensiero* (1984), Calvino singled out the idea of *Gleichnis*—however misleadingly translated as ‘figura’, instead of parable—and connected its semantic value to the ‘visività mitica’ which appears ‘nel modo più convincente nei riferimenti a Kafka’ (*L*, p. 1502). According to Rella, this is the case because Kafka ‘non ha più ipotizzato filosoficamente un mondo organizzato secondo una finalità’, as Friedrich Nietzsche or Robert Musil did, ‘ma lo ha raccontato, risolvendo l’ibridazione dei linguaggi in un nuovo “racconto”, in un mito come capacità di comporre in una traiettoria, o in una peripezia, una pluralità di sensi e di cose’.<sup>82</sup>

I would like to conclude with this possible interpretation of Kafka’s *Gleichnis*, and suggest that the cosmicomic parabola is, in fact, a parable on the actual hybridization of our written world. Once Kafka discovered the hybrid reality of visible and invisible worlds, which is one of the most powerful myth structures of modern literature, as explained by Doležal, he ‘used its semantic potential to generate many and diverse stories’.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, Calvino used it to bet on the existence and the figurative truth of the cosmicomic universe: ‘La scommessa di Italo Calvino è stata quella di far scaturire da questo universo invisibile e quasi impensabile delle storie capaci di evocare suggestioni elementari come i miti cosmogonici dei popoli dell’antichità’ (*RR*, II, 1306).

Each in his own way, both writers ask the reader to ‘go over’ and ‘vivere magari il quotidiano nei termini più lontani dalla nostra esperienza’ (*RR*, II, 1300). And despite the fact that any bet on parables can be won in reality but lost in parable, as stated in Kafka’s unfathomable conclusion,<sup>84</sup> possible-worlds interpretations show (if they do not prove) that Calvino won his bet in all the worlds of Qfwfq.

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

DAVIDE MESSINA

<sup>82</sup> Franco Rella, *Metamorfosi: immagini del pensiero* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1984), p. 126; cf. *ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>83</sup> Doležal, *Heterocosmica*, p. 189.

<sup>84</sup> Kafka, *Short Stories*, p. 457.